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Michael Boyle
Loyola University Chicago

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Supporting Students with Disabilities in Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Catholic Higher Education Perspective

By Michael J. Boyle, Ph.D., director of the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education, School of Education, Loyola University Chicago

The *Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (November 16, 1978) has been referred to as one of the most important documents of the American Church regarding persons with disabilities. It sets forth a vision of Church as a place where all are truly welcomed. The *Pastoral Statement* has as much relevance for Catholic organizations today as it did 40 years ago.

Catholic schools are responding to this call to open their doors to students with disabilities in increasing numbers, yet are in need of support and guidance in order to effectively build more inclusive environments for those students. Catholic colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to assist in addressing this call.

The recently released white paper on the exceptional learner from the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) outlines an agenda that could help frame such efforts. Boyle and Bernards' 2017 *One Spirit, One Body: An Agenda for Serving Students with Disabilities in Catholic Schools* provides suggestions for how Catholic colleges and universities can take affirmative steps to support the needs of students with disabilities who want to attend Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Catholic institutions of higher education can use their position to translate evidenced-based approaches in serving those with disabilities in the pre-kindergarten to 12th grade Catholic school context.

Ideas for Collaboration and Change

To this end, several avenues of collaboration can occur between Catholic schools and Catholic colleges and universities that help meet the parameters suggested in the *Pastoral Statement*. One of the most common forms of collaboration that currently exists in many dioceses is partnering with Catholic higher education to provide access to existing graduate programs with a focus on special education (often through tuition remission for Catholic educators). Although it can be a helpful approach, this strategy can be enhanced when the graduate programs focus on the unique context of special education in a Catholic school setting.

It is important for faculty to understand that the obligations of the local public school in relation to the provision of special education are not the same obligations that apply to a Catholic school setting. It is critical for Catholic college faculty to be cognizant of the intricacies related to addressing the needs of those with disabilities in Catholic schools. Unlike their public school counterparts, students with disabilities in Catholic schools do not have individual entitlement to special education services and may be eligible only to receive services consistent with the proportionate share plans. This may mean that they receive services at a less intense level than if they were attending a public school placement. This places a unique burden on the Catholic school, which may feel compelled to serve those with disabilities but may not have the necessary resources to do so. By helping their graduates understand critical differences of this sort, Catholic schools of education can positively affect the practice of special education approaches within the Catholic school setting.

Moving from the more traditional approach of providing graduate programs, Catholic universities also can help advance diocesan programming for students with disabilities through a focus on *implementation science*. By using evidenced-based approaches to system change, Catholic institutions of higher education can partner with offices of Catholic education to implement such programming in systematic and effective ways.

As an example, the Andrew M. Greeley Center for Catholic Education and the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago developed the Leading Inclusive Catholic Schools (LInCS) certificate program, which aims to build the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Catholic school principals and teacher-leaders to develop school-wide systems, structures, and practices to support all learners with an explicit focus on Catholic schools. Change theory is integrated throughout the program so that principals and teacher-leaders have the capacity to make the necessary systems changes that lead to effective programming for students with disabilities.

In the *Pastoral Statement*, the bishops called for Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers to receive "in-service training in how to best integrate disabled students into programs of regular education." Catholic higher education can take the lead in creating and delivering professional development processes for schools and

dioceses on comprehensive approaches to inclusion within Catholic school settings. Creating practitioner showcases to highlight effective inclusion practices that are currently being undertaken in Catholic schools can help build the confidence and competence of other Catholic school staff.

One such conference is *The Mustard Seed Project*, an annual conference held at Loyola University Chicago that explores the important topic of serving students with disabilities within the Catholic school setting. Drawing on the experience of Catholic school professionals and clinicians, as well as higher education faculty, the conference highlights promising practices and provides practical lessons on inclusive practices in Catholic schools. University faculty from several Catholic colleges and universities and Catholic school practitioners are frequent contributors to this event. It should be noted that attendance has grown significantly year to year, demonstrating a growing interest for this type of professional development among Catholic educators.

An area for potential collaboration for Catholic higher education is the development of additional resources to support programming for students with disabilities. By creating resource manuals, program guides, and other publications, Catholic university faculty can use their expertise to identify and promote effective practices in programming. These resources could be shared on a web-based repository that houses products targeted at the implementation of inclusive practices.

By developing platforms of this nature, Catholic schools from around the country can connect and network about inclusive practices. This has the potential to increase access to expert information from Catholic higher education to support local efforts of meeting the needs of those with disabilities. Ultimately, by highlighting effective practices and promoting collaboration, such a repository would have the potential to increase and enhance programming to support all learners in Catholic schools by promoting levels of collaboration and cooperation.

Program evaluation offers a final area of potential collaboration. Catholic college and university faculty can develop metrics to assist in evaluating programs for students with disabilities within the Catholic school setting. Those faculty are uniquely positioned to develop methodology that would review inclusive programs and ensure that a standard of care is established. Formulating implementation rubrics and planning guides based on best practices to



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assist Catholic schools in the various stages of developing approaches for inclusion can ensure that high-quality programs are developed. This can also help operationalize effective Catholic school practices to serve as exemplars of aspirational approaches.

Living Our Identity

The Church continually provides a challenge to serve those who might be marginalized. As Pope Francis has stated:

Here I would stress that dedication and concern shown to migrants and to persons with special needs alike is a sign of the Spirit. Both situations are paradigmatic: they serve as a test of our commitment to show mercy in welcoming others and to help the vulnerable to be fully a part of our communities (47, *Amoris Laetitia*).

In light of the upcoming 40th anniversary of the *Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities*, Catholic colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to support pre-K–12 Catholic schools in finding avenues to increase our welcome to those with disabilities, with the goal of being fully part of the Church community. Through collaboration, Catholic colleges and universities can heed the bishops' call for welcome and, ultimately, reaffirm their own Catholic identity. ✕